

HOME ECONOMICS AND THE IDEA

OF EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

By

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At one time, it was considered that education for women was a waste, of time and money.¹ It was thought that the type of education which men sought was unsuitable for women. They neither had the mind to understand it, nor the constitution to undertake it. And what purpose would it serve; a women's place was in the home.

Teaching women to manage their homes properly, was the first goal of Domestic Science courses. (later called Home Economics) By studying the development of a Home Economics Department in a small woman's college, I will try to answer the question:, Has the idea of education for women changed?²

Sweet Briar College (then called Sweet Briar Institute³) opened its doors as a women's educational institution in 1906. From its beginning to 1928, Sweet Briar offered a Department of Home Economics. First titled Domestic Science,⁴ it offered courses in food, clothing, shelter, and household management. At its end in 1928, then titled Home Economics,⁵ there were only three courses being offered; foods, dietetics and household managment.⁶ Under either title, there was never a major in Home Economics. Majors were offered in English, Modern Languages, Ancient Languages, History and Economics, Mathematics and Physics, and Science.⁷ The first year Domestic Science was offered with the qualification that the courses would not count towards a Bachelor of Arts Degree.⁸ The second year a "General Requirement" was announced which states that students must take, "...five full subjects, three of which must be subjects other than music, art, or

domestic science."⁹ This leads us to an interesting question:, If Home Economics courses do not count for a degree, then why offer them at all?

It was Mrs. J. C. Williams,¹⁰ opinion that President Benedict was following an expressed wish of the Founder¹¹ in having a Home Economics Department. She believed the Founder stated in her Will a desire for instruction in this type of education. There is no such statement in the Will. The Founder requested an educational institution for girls, but left the decision as to what type to the Directors she appointed.¹² She gave them a broad outline to follow by stating:

"It shall be the general scope and object of the school to impart to its students such an education in sound learning, and such physical, moral, and religious training as shall in the judgment of the Directors best fit them to be useful members of society."¹³

References to curriculum, in the early Board of Directors meetings, are very general.¹⁴ If there was discussion on what specific courses would be offered, I have not found it. We can only assume why there was a Home Economics Department in the beginning. Knowing that the Directors were all close friends with the Founder, they may have believed this was her wish. This wish may actually have been expressed verbally to one or all of the Directors before her death, but no written record has been found. Or they may have considered training in Home Economics necessary in a woman's education.

I believe it was a combination of the two. At that time very few women had jobs outside the home, especially in the class of women who would have the money for higher education. Also, it is

quite possible that this class of women did not learn any Home Economics at home. Full time maids, cooks and housekeepers were the rule rather than the exception at that time. Have we found then, not only WHY Home Economics was started, but what its PURPOSE was?

Was Home Economics' only purpose to equip women in the 'role' it was assumed they would have, as a homemaker, wife, and mother? The purpose of Home Economics is not so easy to pinpoint. Changes in society, a World War, and Suffrage for Women, all play a part in its changing purpose. A statement, printed in the College Catalogue in 1921, reflects one change. It states:

The department of Home Economics is designed to Fit students for the intelligent and scientific management of their homes and with the home as the basis of action to lead them out as sympathetic and useful members of their respective communities.¹⁵

A women's place is no longer only in the home, but has expanded to her community as well.

The inclusion of a Home Economics Department for the purpose of educating a well'rounded woman, seems now to be the goal. With education, not only in History, English, the Arts and Science, but also in the practical side of life. In 1925 Miss McVea (the second and then current President of Sweet Briar) sums it up well when she wrote:

Home Economics, not based primarily on cooking, and not including textiles of any kind, but dealing with budgeting, interior decoration, and advanced forms of cooking, is an integral part of the regular college curriculum, just as it is a normal part of the life of practically every woman.¹⁶

Why then was the Home Economics Department discontinued? Did women no longer need instruction in the practical side of life?

No it seems the purpose of the Home Economics Department was carried on, even after the end of the Department itself. What seems to be part of the trouble was having a Department CALLED Home Economics, even though it carried no credit. The Home Economics Department seemed to be controversial from the beginning. In 1907¹⁷ there was a discussion on whether Home Economics courses should be considered academic. It was decided they should not be, as we saw in the "General Requirement"¹⁸ of 1907. In 1911 the Department was further qualified by this statement: "Beginning September 1913 all courses in Home Economics, except those designed for students taking college work, will be discontinued."¹⁹ The problem which led to this, and the possible consequences, were clearly pointed out in a letter from President Benedict to the Board in 1912. She felt:

...that the school is failing to realize the idea set for it as an educational institution, namely that it should be an institution of collegiate rank...We want to cut out the elementary work in Domestic Science in order to put the girls into the regular work...²⁰

It seems of the 272 students enrolled in 1912-1913 only 66 were college students, while 16 were preparing for college work, and 190 were Special Students.²¹ Special Students who were taking a variety of courses on the 'finishing school' level. Students who had not taken high school work, would not take pre-college work; but rather, would take courses in no set manner and with no goal in mind, other than having a couple of years 'away at school.' Thus came the first serious charge against the Home Economics Department. It was accused, and with reason, that it was lowering the collegiate standards of the college. Though the blame cannot be laid only at Home Economics'

door, but also must rest with the students of that time.

In 1927 a study of other colleges was made to consider how they handled a number of departments, including Home Economics. It was reported that few other colleges had a department called Home Economics. Those that did, had large departments with laboratories for practical work. But, it was noted that, colleges without a department taught the material in other departments.²² This report was made by the Committee on Curriculum²³ and given to the faculty on May 4, 1927.²⁴ No conclusions were drawn and no recommendations made, but the report seemed to suggest only two ways of dealing with the problem of the Home Economics Department. Either enlarge it to include practical training; or discontinue the Department as such, while giving its material in other departments. As we see in the January 1928 report, the latter won.

The January report states:

The Department of Home Economics is to be discontinued: Much of the material heretofore given in that department will be presented in the courses following. In place of Home Economics 1-2 (Foods) there will be a course given by the Chemistry Department. The Chemistry of Foods and Nutrition 13-14...In place of Home Economics 5-6 (Household Economics), the department of Social Sciences offers, two courses of one semester each; as follows. Economics 15 Household Economics...Sociology 8 The Family....²⁵

Thus the Home Economics Department is demolished, but the material given in it is still considered good and is made 'respectable' by the changing of the department name under which it is taught. This seems to suggest that women still should learn about Home Economics, but the very name Home Economics does not belong on the collegiate level, for it rings more of a 'finishing school' than a college.

I do not think these are the only reasons Home Economics was discontinued, though they are the only ones recorded. We must also remember that high school education was more accepted by this time. In effect, it took over much of the elementary teaching of Home Economics. Has this destruction of Home Economics effected any change in the idea of education for women?

No, I think not. Changing words used to describe education for women does not change the idea. In 1810 Elijah Fletcher²⁶ wrote to his father; "I think female education is too much neglected. They are the ones who have the first education of children and ought to be qualified to instruct them correctly."²⁷ Thus Mr. Fletcher's idea of education for women was to help them in their accepted 'role' of that day - motherhood. This same idea was stated by Indiana Fletcher Williams in her Will. The key words are "...useful members of society..."²⁸ Again, the idea of education for women was to give them the knowledge to fit into what was currently considered their accepted 'role' by society, though in this case that 'role' was not defined. The same is true today. A statement of mission recently presented by Sweet Briar College states; "Sweet Briar is a four-year independent college whose aim is to prepare women to be active, responsible members of society."²⁹ This statement follows the same idea of education for women, but again no 'role' is defined.

There are many 'roles' for women today. The 'role' which a Liberal Arts Education, such as Sweet Briar's, enables one to fit are many. Its goal was stated well by Rev. Grammer in 1924, he felt a woman should be; "...trained according to the needs of her own

individuality; where not learning, but equipment in mind and character is the goal...."³⁰ A woman's choices today are unlimited. It is up to everyone to choose which is the 'right role' to suit her own individuality.

Society has changed too, it no longer looks at women as weak creatures to be sheltered from life. In a statement of policy, in 1901, the Board of Sweet Briar refers to adapting the study program to the "...needs and capabilities of the female mind..."³¹ Today a woman's mental capabilities are no longer questioned as we quote, again from the mission statement: "While recognizing the distinctive qualities of womanhood, the College believes that excellence knows no gender."³²

The idea of education for women has not changed. What has changed is the 'role' of women and society itself. Nor should it change. The foundation of all education is to prepare people, men or women, to live in the world around them; as fully and completely as possible.

NOTES

1. As this paper would have been without the valuable help of: Miss Dorothy Jester, Mr. Peter Daniel, Mr. Russel Shipe, Mr. Gerald Berg, and most of all Mr. Roscoe Fitts; all of whom I wish to take this opportunity to thank.
2. This is the same type of approach that Marc Block used in The Royal Touch, though not as well I'm sure. He studied the healing powers of Kings in Western Europe in order to discover an insight into King's undisputed hold over their subjects--the great loyalty they received.
3. Indiana Fletcher Williams, who founded Sweet Briar, requested the school be called Sweet Briar Institute. After it was decided Sweet Briar would be a collegiate school, the word college was substituted for institute in general use.
4. Sweet Briar College Catalogue. 1906-11. "First Year Book of Sweet Briar Institute" 1906-1907. p54.
5. The title of this department was changed three times. In 1910 its title was changed to Home Economics; in 1912 it was changed back to Domestic Science; and in 1917 changed again to Home Economics, which it kept to the end in 1928. In this paper Home Economics and Domestic Science will be used interchangeably.
6. Sweet Briar College Catalogue. 1928-1932. Home Economics is no longer listed as a Department with courses to offer.
7. Sweet Briar College Catalogue. 1906-1932. (5 Vols.) Other Majors such as; Philosophy, Psychology, and Economics were added, but never one in Home Economics.
8. From 1906 to 1917 a Bachelor of Arts was the only degree offered by Sweet Briar. In 1917 a Bachelor of Science was added. In 1935 the Bachelor of Science was discontinued, currently a Bachelor of Arts degree is the only one offered.
9. Sweet Briar College Catalogue. 1906-11. "Second Year Book of Sweet Briar College" 1907-1908. p62.
10. Jessamine Chapman Williams. "The Domestic Science Department." March 17, 1953: She was the first instructor of Home Economics at Sweet Briar College, from 1906-1911.
11. Indiana Fletcher Williams left the bulk of her estate in the hands of trustees, whom she appointed, for the founding of Sweet Briar in the memory of her daughter Daisy.

12. Trustees: Right Reverend A. M. Randolph, D. D., LL. D., of Norfolk, Virginia; Reverend J. M. Carson of Lynchburg, Virginia; Reverend Arthur P. Gray of Amherst, Virginia; Mr. Stephen R. Harding of Amherst, Virginia. They appointed: Reverend Carl E. Grammer, LL.D., of Norfolk, Virginia; Dr. J. M. McBryde, Ph.D, LL.D., of Blacksburg, Virginia; Judge Legh R. Watts of Portsmouth Virginia. These men were the first Board of Directors of Sweet Briar College.
13. Indiana Fletcher Williams, "The Will of Indiana Fletcher Williams." 1900. pp. 3-4.
14. "Record Board of Directors." Sweet Briar Institute, 1901-?.p 194. A general idea of the courses to be offered. It states; "At the opening it will be best, in the judgment of the committee, to offer courses in literature, classical or general, in science and of a more or less predominantly artistic character. In the formulation of such courses, the committee recommends that certain essentials of liberal culture is prescribed in each course."
15. Sweet Briar College Catalogue. 1918-22. "Catalogue of Sweet Briar College," 1921-1922. p 62.
16. Emilie Watts McVea. "Sweet Briar College - An Interpretation" in Bulletin Sweet Briar College, Vol VIII #6. Sweet Briar Institute, June 1925. p 7.
17. "Faculty Meeting Minutes," Vol. 1. 1906-1910/11. p. 47.
18. See page 1-2 of this paper and note #9.
19. Sweet Briar College Catalogue. 1911-1917. "Catalogue of Sweet Briar College," 1911-1912. p 66.
20. "Reports of President Mary K. Benedict to the Board of Directors of Sweet Briar College." 1909-1914. Report of November 22, 1912. pp 1 and 5.
21. "Reports of President Mary K. Benedict to the Board of Directors of Sweet Briar College." 1909-1914. Report of November 22, 1912. p 2.
22. "Instruction 1926 - Aug. 1932." Report of May 3, 1927. p4.
23. Though the first report was titled Report of the Committee on Curriculum, no Committee with that title existed. The Committee on Instruction came into existence in 1916-1917 school year and is so titled in all records found. The May report was found in the file of the Instruction Committee reports and is signed by a member of that committee, Caroline Sparrow.
24. "Faculty Meeting Minutes," Vol. 8. 1925-29. Faculty Meeting of

May 5, 1927. p 1. The minutes state; "...Professor Sparrow reported for the Committee on Curriculum..." This seems to substantiate the source for note #23.

25. "Instruction 1926 - Aug. 1932." Report of January 1928. pp 1, 1½, and 2.
26. Elijah Fletcher was Indiana Fletcher Williams father. (1789-1858)
27. Martha von Briesen. The Letters of Elijah Fletcher. University Press of Virginia Charlottesville, 1965. p 16. Letter of October 1, 1810.
28. See page 2 of this paper and note # 13.
29. "The Mission Statement of Sweet Briar College." May 13, 1977.
30. Rev. Carl E. Grammer, "Commencement Address, June 3, 1924; Personality and Education" in Bulletin Sweet Briar College, Vol. VII #5. Sweet Briar Institute, July 1924. p 12.
31. Sweet Briar College Catalogue. 1906-11. "First Year Book of Sweet Briar Institute" 1906-1907. p 11.
32. "The Mission Statement of Sweet Briar College." May 13, 1977.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Block, Marc. The Royal Touch. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973.

Mr. Block covers his topic, loyalty to Kings, in an unusual way; through the sacredness of Kings. A prior knowledge of the Royal Succession of Western European Countries would add to the understanding of this work.

Location: Sweet Briar Library, stacks.

von Briesen, Martha. The Letters of Elijah Fletcher. University Press of Virginia Charlottesville, 1965.

When Mr. Fletcher came to Virginia in 1810, he was a man of moderate means. On his death in 1858, his estate was of considerable size. Through his daughter Indiana, his estate later became Sweet Briar College. Mr. Fletcher's letters reflect his business dealing, his life style, and his opinions on various topics, including education for women.

Location: Sweet Briar Library, stacks.

"Faculty Meeting Minutes," Vol. 1-8. 1906-1929.

Before 1911 the faculty meeting minutes included a detailed account of the problems and decisions effecting the college. In 1911 the Board of Directors formed the faculty into committees which then handled these problems. The committees reported to the faculty as a whole, usually in the following manner: "the 'x' Committee presented its report. It was seconded, carried, and filed." About the only thing left to the faculty as a whole by the Board was the handling of student matters. Though the meetings were not very detailed, through them I was able to confirm when reports of the Instruction Committee were presented to the faculty and if they were accepted.

Location: Office and Workroom, to the right of door, first section, fourth shelf.

Grammer, Rev. Carl E., "Commencement Address, June 3, 1924; Personality and Education" in Bulletin Sweet Briar College, Vol. VII #5. Sweet Briar Institute, July 1924.

It should be noted that this was a commencement address, a time when speakers are noted for painting a bright and cheerful view of whatever topic they are speaking about. It is unclear if Rev. Grammer is stating what Sweet Briar was like, or what he wanted it to be. Either way it is what Sweet Briar should be.

Location: Archives of Sweet Briar College. Right side from door, third section from window, second shelf.

"Instruction 1926 - Aug. 1932."

The reports included recommendations of changes in the curriculum. Reports stated results of surveys and suggested changes in courses. The May report states it makes no

recommendations, but the wording reflects a dislike of the Home Economics Department.

Location: Office and Workroom, to the right of the door, first section, second shelf.

McVea, Emilie Watts. "Sweet Briar College - An Interpretation" in Bulletin Sweet Briar College, Vol VIII #6. Sweet Briar Institute, June 1925.

Miss McVea's article represents her views on the advantages of a Sweet Briar education. She has only praise for Sweet Briar and from it one would think Sweet Briar was perfect. Thus, her article presents a picture too good to be totally believed.

Location: Archives of Sweet Briar College. To the right of the door, third section from window, second shelf.

"The Mission Statement of Sweet Briar College." May 13, 1977.

This statement was written by the present faculty members of Sweet Briar College. It shows their conception of Sweet Briar, education, and women. This statement will probably be quoted or distributed to alumnae, prospective students and faculty, and in much of the literature printed by the College.

Location: Unknown, the copy I have was copied from Mr. Berg's copy. Would assume the Public Information Office has a copy.

"Record Board of Directors." Sweet Briar Institute, 1901-?.

The minutes of the Board contained only general references to academic problems. Mostly they concerned themselves with financial matters.

Location: Room safe in Treasurer's Office, shelf unit across from safe, third shelf.

"Reports of President Mary K. Benedict to the Board of Directors of Sweet Briar College." 1909-1914.

President Benedict is very specific about her opinion of the Home Economics Department and its detrimental effect on the college. She also makes recommendations to correct the problem.

Location: Room safe in Treasurer's Office, on shelf unit across from safe, third shelf.

Sweet Briar College Catalogue. 1906-1932. (5 vols.)

The course of instruction in each catalogue contained a listing for each course offered, including all Home Economics courses. The absence of the Home Economics Department in 1928-1929 told me of its demise. The catalogues can answer just about all the questions a new or prospective student may ask.

Location: Archives of Sweet Briar College. Right wall from door, second section from window, third shelf.